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SWAGS AND FESTOONS.

BY CÉLER ET AUDAX.



LIGHTNESS, elegance and grace are the distinctive claims of this feature of decorative detail upon the suffrages of the designer and decorative artist. An inherent *naturalism* lies in the very fact of its being. It appeals to the sympathetic eye in a manner that all devices of the ornamentist which have been taken directly from the world of nature do appeal.

Purists who rebel against the application of the *festoon* as an ornamental feature on the grounds of this *naturalism* are apt to overlook the fact that it is as admissible to utilize the facts of natural law as of natural growth in the ornamentation of forms to which that natural law would be fitly applicable. It is only when obvious absurdities accompany the application of festooned ornament that we are conscious of any objection to its application as ornament.

We were lately surprised to see that so eminently sensible and trustworthy a teacher as Mr. Lewis F. Day, in his latest work, "Nature in Ornament"—of which we can hardly speak too highly—fails to grasp the fact that the swag, or festoon, is "nature in ornament" quite as much as in vegetation, and that the laws of gravitation and force are as useful a basis on which to build ornament as are the laws of growth.

Of the "swag," Mr. Day says: "It is not altogether a bad idea—the offence is mainly in proportion to its realism. The more a swag looks like weight, the more it wants suspending ribbons to hold it up, and nail-heads to attach it to, the less *endurable* it is." (The italics are ours.)

We should be inclined to the opinion that in a rational use of festoons as ornament the amount of conventionality of form should depend upon the amount of conventionality in the foliage composing them; and that it is as correct in spirit to suggest weight and suspension from a given point in a festoon as it is right and proper to suggest the weight and suspension of an apple depending from its branch, or a bunch of grapes hanging from its vine stalk, *vide* the cleverly-drawn frieze from Mr. Day's own talented hand, which beautifies the work in question.

It is the purely ornamental and conventional use of festoon form in the example of the work of Nicolaus Drausse, in which Mr. Day condones the use of festoons, one end of a garland is attached to the tip of a leaf, a violation of natural and mechanical laws which to us seems infinitely more displeasing than the suggestion of actual suspending nails and confining cords, affected by the artists of the Renaissance. But *tot homines quot sententiæ*; we are digressing.

Swags and festoons have formed a very important and pleasing feature in every style of decoration for ages, except, perhaps, the Gothic, and for certain purposes will probably survive through many yet to come.

The idea was, of course, originally derived from the practice of using actual wreaths for the festival decorations of temples and public places, which idea in its turn might probably be traced to a suggestion from the trailing plants which in primeval forests festooned themselves from branch to branch and tree to tree.

The device was used with fine discrimination and restraint by the Greek and Pompeian artists, developed and enlarged by the Italian, and overdone *usque nauseam* by the French revivalists.

In the application of swags and festoons we cannot too strongly urge upon our readers the vital importance we attach to the principle of fitness and regard for the existence of natural selection of position. Much of the fury with which the form

of ornamentation has been attacked owes its birth to a regardless abuse, first, of the beautiful lines which are obtained by its use; and secondly, to its application in situations absurdly out of character with the form itself.

With regard to the first, it will be seen that the line formed by a cord loosely suspended from two points horizontally in line on with the other is a graceful freehand curve, bearing some resemblance to a segment of an ellipse, and not a perfect arc of one radius. Now the difference between the beauty of a simple and a complex curve is too apparent to need comment here.

The reader has only to contrast a row of semi-circles with a series of natural festoons formed by a soft cord passing loosely over a row of nails placed at equal intervals in a horizontal line, to see at once the distinction to which we refer, and to forswear the so-called swag whose form suggests the track of a swinging pendulum.

Secondly, and perhaps of more importance than the former, is the matter of location. What can be more indefensible than the use of swags upon a ceiling or any other horizontal plane? but perhaps its use in a pattern so repeated that it occurs now and then in a topsy turvy position altogether.

Then, again, how many times we see it thoughtlessly applied even by good men, to the coved or oblique surfaces—sloping rakes without a corresponding allowance for centering, and sometimes, when in proper position, so devised as to possess no adequate means of suspension, setting at defiance the ever-lasting, ever-present law of gravitation.

In connection with the abuse of the swag in ceiling decoration, we have recently seen several popular designs for ceiling papers which are glaring inconsistencies from this point of view, and on remarking upon one of these to a designer of some taste, he defended them upon the ground of precedent, mentioning a well known Pompeian ceiling decoration as a noteworthy instance. The ceiling in question having been looked up, it was soon pointed out that what appeared as swags were not intended by the artist as such, but as splines—that is, thin laths enriched by foliations and bent or sprung into certain geometrical curves, confined by ribbons and cords.

Such festoons as were used in this ceiling had been drawn on plan, viz., straight across from point to point, as if the observer were immediately below them.

Splines were frequently used in conjunction with swags for temporary festival decoration, and are still used by the church decorator in England for the same purposes. Laths of ash or other springy wood are cut to a length, decked with evergreens and then sprung into arch molds or heads of windows, keeping their position by reason of their elasticity.

In Pompeian work we are often puzzled by arch-like forms which appear to be festoons placed upside down. These have undoubtedly been suggested by the spline.

To be brief, then, swags should only be used upon upright walls or other perpendicular planes, friezes, entablatures, the flat front of cornices, pilasters, doors, dados, facias, etc., where they do no violence to our common sense view that a suspended object should hang downwards.

For friezes it is one of the pleasantest forms that decoration can take, giving apparent height and breadth such as cannot be obtained by the use of either upright growth or horizontal repeats.

It may be used either with or without lines or horizontal bands below it, and if a room is not lofty it is often a valuable expedient to omit lines, as the swag will form a frieze without subtracting from the apparent height or infringing upon the amount of ground color.

If stencilled flatly in one or two colors the design and drawing should be extremely conventional. The naturalistic treatment is only admissible for hand-painted work.

The examples given are all generally useful, of no decided style, and can be made available for any ordinary job unless it be Gothic in character, when festoons will be altogether out of taste and style.

Some good stencil designs of swags and festoons are shown on the following page. No. 1 is a simple motive that would make a graceful border; No. 2 is a bold and original treatment of the laurel, a fine festoon; No. 3 is an artistic swag, the fruit motives suggesting weight; Nos. 4, 5, 6 and 7 are graceful variations of classic motives.



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